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ABSTRACT

Education is one of the social institutions manipulated by New Zealand's European people to establish and perpetuate a painfully fragmented society. Po Ako is a community-based educational project where immigrant teachers, parents, and children from Tonga educate themselves at night about their own culture to better understand themselves and their new situation in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The separation of Tongan students from the official educational practices in secondary schooling is necessary to their understanding of their collective situation of dispossession in Eurocentric New Zealand society and how to change it. Formed in 1991 in response to the failure of the school to prepare Tongan students to pass the Year 10 national examination, Po Ako operates for 2 hours on Monday and Wednesday evenings. Funding is the cooperative responsibility of the students, parents, school, and government. Tongan and Maori women and men from a range of ages, occupations, and academic disciplines tutor students in their weak subjects. The curriculum content is questioned and clarified in a way that differs from the students' routine learning context so that they may select the grain from the chaff in formal schooling. Tongan language and cultural experiences strengthen students' comprehension of the subject under study. One program goal is to mobilize Tongan parents to know and question the dominant technocratic teaching practices, and to that end Tongan parents meet with teachers and administrators during Po Ako to discuss their ideas for educating their youth. (TD)

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Education in the night: a serious separation

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Discussion

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The purpose of the paper is to share sets of activities and reflections upon the notion of educating sons and daughters of immigrant parents from the Kingdom of *Tonga*. On this situation, particular reference is made to an educational project called *Pō Ako* that includes multiple literacies and multiple discourses.[1] There is within the discussion a particular preoccupation on the strengths and contributions of teachers, students, and parents who are descendants of The First People of *Tonga* in the English-speaking pedagogical setting in Aotearoa. It is important to make clear that the community has continued their ties to their own culture throughout the educational project. It is a relationship encouraging them to be less dependent on the perspectives, values, and assumptions built into technocratic approaches of practice that administrators prescribe in the official curriculum. Within the unpreparedness of *Tongan* parents to apprehend the expressions and institutions of the prevailing New Zealand European/Pākehā society they assume the collective position on the side of teachers, colleagues, tutors, and their daughters and sons whose cultures are devalued in secondary schooling.

For Indigenous teachers, such as Māori and *Tongan* teachers, who do not view education purely as an uncritical technical process teaching is necessarily an interventionist process. Their turning away from action against the kind of devaluing practices prescribed in a curriculum disconnected from *Tongan* language and cultural experiences, for example, could be explained as reinforcing their own material condition and thus playing a part in perpetuating a discriminating situation.

[1] The terminology "multiple literacies" means the different subject-content *Tongan* students are taught in the secondary school in Aotearoa, and then require clarification in a project such as *Pō Ako*. The term "multiple discourses" refers to the use of the *Tongan* and English linguistic symbols and cultural practices in teaching and learning in *Pō Ako*.

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But when their conviction is that the schooling of large numbers of students is denied or muted in school, personal and collective intervention directed at educational change would seem imperative.

All of us in school - teachers, administrators, allied staff, students, and parents - behold the world through our particular ways of seeing and thinking about reality and society. We hold these beliefs in a largely unconscious way. Since much of our apprehension of society is culturally shared, we simply talk about "the way the world is," the way the school is," and so forth. The problem arises when teachers and administrators encounter Indigenous adolescents (and their parents) who are at odds with the cultural values, beliefs, and aspirations of the prevailing culture. The indiginists may appear to them as being uneducated, poor, "at risk," or "without a language to think in". This clash of cultures is what can happen when adolescents from *Tonga*, for example, arrive in school.

One problem with current methodology exposing students to a dispassionate paradigm of education is that it denies more and more Indigenous students and teachers opportunities for engaging the human act of learning about our own concrete existence. The authors maintain, then, that the detached skills and training in curriculum content and techniques are insufficient to affirm successful learning by Tongan students in the secondary school. The point being made is that education is not exclusively about telling the adolescents how to memorize prescribed fragments of data. The issue is not the techniques and methods in themselves. The issue and focus is the comprehension of the repercussions of the political-pedagogical process. This means that instead of passive objects waiting to be saturated with lists of information, teachers who are Indigenous could reclaim educational spaces encouraging the students to exhibit their competence as users and owners of knowledge.

From the vantage-point of Indigenous *Tongan* and Maori teachers who are educators of students from diverse language and cultural universes we set out to depict an affirming response to this clash of cultures. The following questions establish the discussion about educating *Tongan* students: How can a community based education project contribute to *Tongan* students learning to affirmatively recognise themselves in their people?; how can teachers, parents, and tutors create the conditions whereby *Tongan* youth can enrich their familiar discourse and academic proficiencies?; and how can a *Tongan* based project engender political understanding, development, and action for Tongan parents who are immigrants?

Education is one of the social institutions manipulated by New Zealand European/Pākehā people to establish and perpetuate a painfully fragmented society in Aotearoa. What Stanley Arronowitz has called "the testing apparatus that measures the students' "progress" in ingesting externally imposed curriculae and more insidiously, provides a sorting device to reproduce the inequalities" in society. On this understanding of education, Tongan students whose language and culture is not the standard-English cultural formation, struggle to establish an intimate connection between knowledge deemed valuable to the regular course of study in secondary schooling and knowledge that is the harvest of the concrete experience of *Tongan* students.[2] What is important is that *Tongan* students subjected to complex, contradictory education situations are supported to keep alive the flame of resistance that provokes their curiosity and incites their capacity for risk, for adventure. The idea is to strengthen them against New Zealand European/Pākehā society that disconnects them from their own culture.[3]

Therefore, the paper presents a case to support a Theory of Separation as a condition of integration and not disconnection in the English-speaking pedagogical space.

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[2] See Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom* (p. 36). Rowman & Littlewood Publishers Inc: U.S.A.

[3] Freire (1998, p. 32).

The educational project called Pō Ako is a place where teachers, parents and their children educate themselves in the night in their own culture, to know better about themselves and their new situation in Aotearoa. Central to the educative process in Pō Ako are Tongan students who are immigrants to Aotearoa, or born in Aotearoa, and/or raised in Aotearoa and the concrete involvement of the Māori and Tongan teachers. The important suggestion is that Tongan students' separation from the official educational practices in secondary schooling should contribute to strengthening understanding of their collective situation of dispossession in New Zealand European/Pākehā society and then to change it. It should be emphasised that coming to understand their historical and fragmented position requires a great deal of political clarity. At the heart of all this is the idea not to give up.

Pō Ako is a part of a process of how *Tongan* language and culture can provide the conditions for an education that 'draws from the souls' of the people to prod and awaken each other.[4] In doing so, Tongan people challenge administrators to change the objectives, pedagogy, roles, responsibilities and meanings in a single secondary school.

The theory: A notion of separate education

It is important to emphasize that it is not the authors' intention to 'showcase' the *Pō Ako*. The point is that a showcase reduces the complexities of the project to lists of *how to* and pieces of *measurable outcomes*. Sooner or later, these lists will be commodified into packages of quick-fix techniques and methods ready for transplanting anywhere and everywhere, for sale to anyone and everyone throughout the world. The view is that to showcase the *Pō Ako* or any communal act by people from the Indigenous cultural milieu would not favour the people who live the particular project. Nor will it benefit those who might receive a quick-fix' package since all

actions, responses, methods, and projects are established in the cultural values of those individuals and collectives who create them. Also, it is important to note that separate education must be distinguished from the informal and rote learning that occurs in Scouts, Brownies, Girl Guides; the *Tongan* Sunday school, Bible study, choir group, prayer group; and so on. Informal education is incidental and not seriously structured. Separate education is well structured, has a seriousness of purpose, of its capacity to contribute to *Tongan* people's understanding and enriching their own culture, and to enhancing *Tongan* students' learning of subject-content without the demand to concentrate simply on examination preparation.

In theory, separation authorises *Tongan* people to question, discuss, and change the ways they are socially constructed to live their lives dispossessed of their own linguistic and cultural practices in Aotearoa. The point being made is that transformation as a process takes place when people question, when they come to know about what is going on with and, without them. Separation is a condition of the peoples' serious participation in integration and not of their disconnection from the dominant society. Separate education continues the conventional subject matter in the form of homework and provides skills students might have missed during the school-day.[5] More importantly, though, it involves its own particular form, that confronts the educational, cultural and political disconnections and connections between *Tongan* people and the school environment. Finally, separate education presents educational and political activities that can be practiced separately or concurrently with the official school as conditions arise.[6]

To convey the political purpose of the education plan, it is necessary to specify the assumptions esteemed by the prevailing teaching paradigm. That is, the assumptions that place *Tongan*

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[4] See Mphahlele, E. (1990). Alternative institutions of education for Africans in South Africa: An exploration of rationale, goals, and directions (P. 36). *Harvard Educational Review* 60 (1), 36-47.

[5] In this secondary school, a significant number of *Tongan* students are taught in the C-stream and the Homeroom class. The homework tasks for these low levels generally consists of drawing a title page, gap-filling and copying exercises across subject matter.

adolescents at the bottom of the secondary school's organisation. The first assumption is that English is the only legitimate language for learning and instruction. Second, Tongan adolescents must be forcibly assimilated in English linguistic and social practices as quickly as possible. Third, streaming is a good teaching approach for all students. Streaming means a curriculum that perpetuates the cultural practices of the dominant New Zealand European/Pākehā culture.[7]

The birthplace of *Pō Ako*

The annual A.S.B. Bank Auckland Secondary Schools Māori and Pacific Islands Secondary Cultural Festival is where *Tongan* students are provided a space by the official structures who have a vested interest in cultural fragmentation to showcase Tongan songs, dances, and costumes. This means that *Tongan* students are sanctioned by New Zealand European/Pākehā society to portray their songs, dances, and national dress within a twenty-minute-once-a-year framework called the *Tonga* Section. For the first six weeks of each school year some of the secondary schools in the largest Polynesian city in the world called Auckland, permit '*Tongan* cultural experts' to conduct student-volunteers to rote-learn and mimic their own songs and dances. It is important to note that the cultural experts, among them senior high school students, are approved by the school administration to instruct the performers; most often, when the formal day has ended.

Present-day realities, including the political, social and economic separation of *Tongan* communities from one another and from their *Tongan* roots, make it imperative that they tackle the problem piecemeal in the initial stages of the struggle to reconnect "who I am" and the school. Somehow, the *Tongan* community who reside in suburban Mt Roskill had to act

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[6] Freire (1998, p. 4). See also Mphahlele, (1990, pp. 36-47).

[7] See Reyes, M, de la luz.(1992). Challenging venerable assumptions: Literacy instruction for linguistically different students (p. 431). *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (4), 427-446

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communally to establish a separate, constructive and legitimate innovation against a social institution that excluded Tongan language and ways of knowing. For them, the festival was the epoch of transition, during which they began to translate their ideas and hopes reflexively for solidarity into educational policies and practice to enrich Tongan students in a separate space. The innovation would support the students "to select the grain from the chaff in formal schooling" and at the same time establish deeper meaning and strength in their daily lives.[8] Thus teachers, such as ourselves, could not shirk the responsibility, however arduous, of changing the educational content, objectives, and pedagogy that make Tongan adolescents drop out of school in numbers, or are thrown out due to an inadequate institution. The view is that no longer should the teachers, students and their parents be bullied into simply adapting to the New Zealand European/Pākehā society. Take, for example, the practice that permits the Head of Department to decide whether a Tongan student should be prepared to participate in the prestigious School Certificate, Bursary and Scholarship examinations for valuable careers, or the Unit Standards national certificate for expendability and docility.

Po Ako in practice

In practice, the education process is separate since it takes place outside of formal school hours and secondary school pedagogy. It should be highlighted that *Pō Ako* is a grassroots initiative. In other words, *Pō Ako* is a "bottom-up" response to technocratic approaches of practice that neglects to draw from the concrete realities of *Tongan* adolescents to educate them for valuable citizenship. The point is that the curriculum had to be radically changed. A richer and more challenging educational context that would strengthen Tongan students' encounter with their own environment, come-to-know themselves more critically, and comprehend the issues of race,

[8] Mphahlele, (1990, p. 38).

class, language and culture in a painfully fragmented school, was pivotal.[9] In this situation, it would be a contradiction in terms, if teachers and administrators from the prevailing perspective on education established an educational project to include *Tongan* people and their culture.

Pō Ako is translated to mean "education in the night". In *Tonga*, most parents and children are familiar with the notion of *Pō Ako*. There, the context is one where primary school students rote learn mathematics, science, English, social studies, and general knowledge to pass the national examination that will allow the individual to enter a secondary school. In Aotearoa, the urban version is a critical, communal project that includes the personal experiences of *Tongan* people and that paves the way for them to transform their own way of seeing and being in the educational process.

The process of transformation occurs in a multiplicity of ways. In 1992, *Pō Ako* made a modest beginning with several meetings among the local *Tongan* community. The purpose of the meetings was to inform the parents that, in 1991, the school had failed to prepare *Tongan* students to accomplish the Year 10 national examination called School Certificate. In fact, only two of the seventeen students who took part in the School Certificate examination, passed. Disastrous results for Aotearoa Māori, Niuean, Cook Islands Māori and Samoan students also prevailed.[10] In semester 2 of the same year, the *Pō Ako* for *Tongan* students in Year 8 and Year 9 officially opened. The project has been attracting young people from twelve to eighteen for the past seven years.[11]

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[9] Mphahlele, E. (1990, 38-39).

[10] Separate programmes for Aotearoa Māori, Cook Island Māori, Niuean, and Samoan students were established in the school as well. The Māori and *Tongan* projects both included political education with the parents and students. Both projects continue in 1999.

[11] In 1995 and 1996, the *Pō Ako* included children from the elementary level.

Since 1992, *Pō Ako* has opened for two hours every Monday and Wednesday, 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. It has taken place in five (5) clean, comfortable, fully-furnished classrooms rent-free. The toilets and the car park are easily reached by the participants. The financial resources are the cooperative responsibility of the students ($10 per week), parents ($10 subscription fee and fundraising efforts), the school (funds allocated by the Board of Trustees), and the government (community funding agency).

From 1992 to 1995, *Tongan* women and men who were retained to tutor the students were drawn from a range of ages, occupations and academic disciplines. Each tutor was made responsible for a particular group of four (4) students as well as the interests of the overall student body. A tutor was paid according to his or her qualification. For example, a tutor who had earned a Masterate degree received a non-taxable $N.Z.30 per hour. *Pō Ako* is a context where *Tongan* students who are alienated in school by day are offered tutoring in their weak subjects at night by tertiary students. One of the project's objectives is to clarify new concepts obstructing the student's thinking and connecting the fragmented bits of information s/he encounters so that the student can contribute and participate in the classroom, the school, and society. For example, the curriculum content is questioned and clarified in a way different from the students' routine learning context. This means that the *Tongan* language and culture prevail. English-language is used in situations where a student resists using Tongan language or when a parent insists on the virtues of English-language. The linguistic practice called code switching has an important and valuable place in the learning process in the Pō Ako. The appropriation of the Tongan ways of coming-to-knowing in the context's methodology contributes to an environment whereby subject-content is perceived by both the tutor and the student as a modest challenge with a successful response. The practice enables humour, joking, and light relief too. The learning environment is familiar to all of us - teachers, students, tutors, administrators and parents.

It is important to note that to teach and learn using the *Tongan* language and culture creates an environment which enables meaningful communication between the tutor and the student, between the student and other students, and between the student and the (con)text. Further, Tongan cultural experiences clarify, strengthen and bolster the adolescent's apprehension of the particular subject-content under study. All of these cultural and education practices are inseparable parts of a whole education process for teenagers who are *Tongan*.

Since 1996, twenty *Pō Ako* students have entered Auckland University. Three former students attend university in the United States. A total of 5 tutors from the *Pō Ako* have accomplished secondary school teacher training at the Auckland College of Education. Two of whom are now teaching in Auckland. Two former tutors teach in *Tonga*, and one individual works at a non-teaching job and continues to tutor students in the *Pō Ako*. Three other tutors returned to *Tonga* and practice in various levels of that country's education system. One tutor who returned to *Tonga* established a *Pō Ako* based on our beliefs and practices of learning deeply about one's own culture as well as academic ideas. In 2001, three tutors in cooperation with the parents operate the project.

Parental participation

Soon after its establishment a political education evening class was established for the parents. That is, *Pō Ako* provides a forum for *Tongan* parents to engage their own language to find out from the tutors, the principal, the heads of department how and why their children who want to pass examinations are denied preparation and participation, and then to intervene.

The Principal who arrived at the school in late 1991 agreed to the wisdom to establish a regular relationship between himself and the parents, the heads of department and the parents, the

Board of Trustees and the parents. The view is that *Pō Ako* is a process where *Tongan* parents, the principal, the heads of departments and other interested colleagues gather to connect ideas about educating *Tongan* adolescents. One topic discussed with fervour is how can a *Tongan* student best learn to link the fragmented bits of information she encounters so that she can contribute and participate in the classroom, the school, and society? Hence, the purpose of the *pō talanoa* (talk in the night) is mutual illumination that should contribute to discontinue the official practice of encountering *Tongan* students simply as the "*Tongan* problem". [12]

Pō Ako is the space and time where *Tongan* parents meet with the women and men who make the decisions about *Tongan* adolescents presence in school. In this *Tongan* place in the night, the parents assume with hope their responsibility to *pō talanoa* with teachers and administrators about their ideas and actions for educating their youth.[13] Throughout the life of the process debate has highlighted the exclusionary practice called streaming. The point is that no longer do these parents believe the school's assertion that streaming benefits all children. This new understanding of streaming brings the parents, on the one hand, to a critique and rejection of the teaching practice and, on the other, to an understanding that even when the pupils are submitted to the practice, they are not necessarily fated to stagnate. More important, though, it is through the very process of learning new knowledge that *Tongan* parents can begin to avert the practice.

As people without political supremacy and economic prosperity, the reality is continual struggle for educational connection between the *Tongan* language and forms of knowing and technocratic approaches of practice.

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[12] *Pō talanoa* is the word in the *Tongan* language to describe the long talks in and through the night.

[13] The *Tongan* language used by the parents was interpreted to English by the *Pō Ako* co-ordinator or invited person. Also, the interpreter carried out the task for a guest speaker who spoke only English.

Final remarks

At the heart of the *Pō Ako* are *Tongan* parents and children living in the suburb of Mt Roskill, Auckland, Aotearoa. The students and the community are encouraged by the *Tongan* teacher and Indigenous colleagues to behold the *Tongan* cultural formation as an important part of education development (transformation).

The *Pō Ako* never set out to mimic the English-speaking pressurised classroom. The preference was always to engage the beliefs, values, and practices of everyday *Tongan* life. In the night, it is gratifying to perceive that *Tongan* language and culture soften the belligerent impact of the dominant New Zealand European/Pākehā culture to which the Indigenous teachers and students are exposed in the light of day. It was always the intention of the project to mobilise the *Tongan* parents to know and to question the dominant technocratic approaches of teaching practice. It was never the purpose of *Pō Ako* to keep them submerged in a situation in which critical understanding and response were practically impossible. That became a reality in 1997 when the parents took over organising *Pō Ako*.

Does education resolve dispassionate education conditions? The answer is no. Yet education, when it bolsters *Tongan* children and their community, and includes a comprehensive awareness of their own environment, their moral strength spirals to confront their fragmented conditions. A deeper understanding of the social institution can also make possibilities visible that were previously imperceptible or unthinkable.[14]

Pō Ako is the realization of the economic, social, and political connections among different people in separate spaces and times. All of the different participants know the project is a

[14] Mphahlele (1990, 45)

success. The mammoth challenge for the men and women in the project is to influence, to politicise other parents and teachers who belong to the *Tongan* cultural milieu in Aotearoa-New Zealand to value and to demand the use of *Tongan* social practices as ways of coming-to-know the educational world beyond the present unrelentless alienation and dispossession. Present-day realities that initially incite educational processes, such as *Pō Ako*, can provide a concrete experience for further planning.

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